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“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”
Commonplace Book

Irony, Narrative Hybrids, and Genre Theory: The Dramatic Monologue and Gissing’s Short Fiction¹

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Introduction

In *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), Gissing writes of Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853):

One wishes that Esther Summerson had not been allowed to write in her own person—or rather to assume, with such remarkable success, the personality of Charles Dickens. This well-meaning young woman, so blind to her own merits, of course had no idea that she was a great humourist and a writer of admirable narrative But for the occasional “I” one may easily enough forget that Miss Summerson is speaking. (54)

If, as Gissing suggests here, first-person narration—when author and character are not sufficiently separated—can weaken a work’s believability, then his infrequent use of this narrative strategy in his own fiction merits closer attention regardless of whether he is fair in his judgment of Dickens’ novel.

For Dino Felluga, “all Victorian poems could be read more fully for their access to and self-conscious questioning of the performative nature of Victorian ideology, especially as that ideology gets articulated in the dominant genre of the realist novel” (496). So too, reversing his terms, can we gain a fuller understanding of and appreciation for Victorian prose by analysing the profound impact that poetry has on it. In what follows, I will explore how Gissing borrows from the dramatic monologue, and how his use of the first-person narrator characteristically emphasises the ironic distance between the way in which his narrators view themselves and the way Gissing as author, and we as readers, view them. The cases examined are two of his short stories in which the speakers are clearly individualized: “My First Rehearsal” (1880) and “The Tyrant’s Apology” (1895). In the former, Richard Morton confides to us that his “position was the (literally) elevated one of clerk in a solicitor’s office, somewhere in the midland

counties" (4), and that "there is no telling to what dignity [he] might not have attained in time had it not been for [a] romantic element in [his] disposition" (4). Gissing undermines his narrator's optimism by gesturing towards Richard's occupation as one of potentially many clerks working in one of many solicitors' offices in one of many British counties, just as in the latter he spurs us—through the heavy hint in the title—to be more critical of the narrator of "The *Tyrant's* Apology" (emphasis added).² This article argues that Gissing's characterization of these first-person narrators carefully stages his reader's expectations, and that his use of this narrative strategy in these two unjustly neglected stories contributes to, as much as it compromises, his stories' realism. Its conclusion examines some wider implications for thinking about the relation between sympathy, perspective, and Victorian literature.

Scholarship on the dramatic monologue has long recognized its debt to different genres. Robert Langbaum identifies the influence of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, "for in the Shakespearean soliloquy as they read it, nineteenth-century poets thought they had found the form by which they could objectify and dramatize their essential subjective and lyrical impulse" (160). Herbert Tucker goes back further when he writes: "We would be hard pressed to prove that Wordsworth's 'The Thorn,' Pope's 'Eloisa to Abelard,' Milton's 'L'Allegro,' and Chaucer's prologue to *The Wife of Bath's Tale* are less dramatic monologues than are scores of poems by Browning, a double handful by Tennyson, and memorable essays in poetic impersonation by Arnold, Meredith, Swinburne, and others" (122). E. Warwick Slinn follows this tradition and moves still further back in time when he argues that "the genre is confounded by uncertain parameters, and attempts at tight formalist definition have usually foundered on a series of necessary qualifications" (82), and when he writes of monologues' and lyrical poems' origins: "The *prosopopoeia*, or impersonation, is a long-standing rhetorical form where a historical or imaginary person is presented as actually speaking; the idylls of Theocritus and Ovid's *Heroides* contain dramatic speeches and epistles; and the tradition of complaint often imitates specified speakers other than the poet" (87).³

However, Langbaum, Tucker, and Slinn all see the genre as being revitalized in the nineteenth century. For Langbaum, the speaker of the dramatic monologue differs from "the character in traditional drama [who] cannot be wholly absorbed in his particular perspective, but keeps one eye on the general perspective from which he must take the judgment of his actions" (163).⁴ Tucker identifies the genre, "for all its fresh emphasis upon the

historicity of the interplay of consciousness and circumstance (as against Romantic ambitions to attain the universality of nature and myth), [as] a lineal descendant of the lyrical ballads, conversation poems, and odes in which Wordsworth and Coleridge, and later Byron, Shelley, and Keats, had first broached this philosophical problem and tried to solve it" (130). Meanwhile, Slinn sees the dramatic monologue as an advance in both style and content: "[T]he move towards a poetry that overtly separated speaker from poet was a step away from the Romantic tendency to emphasize lyrical modes that indulged solitary self-expression—the ode, the hymn, the sonnet. A dramatized speaker is a way of avoiding the excesses of authorial self-absorption—or eluding gender constraints" (81).

Readers of the dramatic monologue can productively think of it as a response to what W. Jackson Bate has identified as the burden of the past. For Bate, the artist is constantly pressured by the question "What is there left to do?" and this question is more pressing for him or her working under the shadow of a generation of literary and artistic greats: "Whatever he may say, or not say, about his predecessors, the poet from Dryden to Eliot has been unavoidably aware of them, and never so much as when he has tried to establish a difference; and he has been keenly and very personally aware of them in a way that he was not, for example (if he was writing in the early eighteenth century), of Newton, Locke, or Shaftesbury" (3-5). With developments in technology, "the means of preserving and distributing the literature (and more recently the other arts) of the past have immeasurably increased, and to such a point that we now have confronting the artist—or have *in potential*—a vast array of varied achievement, existing and constantly multiplying in an 'eternal present'" (Bate 4).⁵ Glennis Byron has persuasively argued for the dramatic monologue's tendency "to disrupt rather than consolidate authority, drawing upon speakers who are in some way alienated from, rather than representative of, their particular societies" (100). This, Byron suggests, makes the dramatic monologue "a particularly appropriate form for the purposes of social critique" (100). If the dramatic monologue enables poets to make use of and to respond to their literary inheritances, and simultaneously to write about their current social and cultural conditions, the same could be said of Gissing's use of the first-person narrator in his short stories.

"My First Rehearsal" and Allusion

The speakers of both "My First Rehearsal" and "The Tyrant's Apology" occupy what Byron would recognize as marginal positions in society. In the

former, a short story that was first published in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* in 1966, Richard quits his job to pursue an acting career in London. On the way there, he meets a recently-dismissed actor, who calls himself Mr. Bradford, and who claims to be the actor-manager of a London theatre. He offers Richard the opportunity to read a prologue that he had written for *Hamlet*. While Richard rehearses it in Mr. Bradford's room, he returns to Richard's and robs him of his clothes, money and possessions. Richard begins his story by confiding to us: "Be it premised that, in the days I am about to speak of, I was very youthful, very romantic, and—fitting climax—very poor" (4). The accumulated weight of Richard's and Mr. Bradford's eight references to youth throughout the short story brings to the forefront the fact that this narrating Richard is now older and wiser—if no better off financially. Wayne Booth reminds us that the first-person narrator's "views of the experience will come between us and the event" (*Fiction* 152), and as Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg have suggested for the eye-witness as a narrative device, two levels of irony are at work: "[T]o the extent that the narrating character is differentiated from the author one ironic gap opens up, and to the extent that the narrating character is differentiated from himself as participant in events another ironic gap appears" (256). Our experience of reading this story is strikingly similar to that of reading a dramatic monologue, which similarly overlays what was happening then with the now. The "face redder than the western sky" (5)—owing to Mr. Bradford's drunkenness—and the unmistakable "trace of good-humoured banter in the smile which played about his lips" (5) that Richard claims that he had detected initially, and his conclusion that Mr. Bradford's "appearance . . . was eminently reassuring" (5) disclose a contest between the viewpoints of the unsuspecting and the more experienced Richard. Still, both Richards are strikingly romantic, and this characteristic circumscribes his ability to read. "I had read with enthusiasm numberless stories," Richard confides to us, "of men who, drawn on by visions of future greatness, had set out in youth for the city which is paved with gold, yet, from the illustrious Whittington downwards, I could not call to mind one who had been dragged thither behind a steam-engine" (4).⁶ Here, Gissing may have been inspired by Dickens, whose Richard Carstone similarly refers to Dick Whittington when he, Ada, and Esther first embark for Bleak House, and whose David Copperfield describes the early stages of his married life when he kept a page as follows: "The principal function of this retainer was to quarrel with the cook; in which respect he was a perfect Whittington, without his cat, or the remotest

chance of being made Lord Mayor” (697). While Dickens circumvents our reading of Richard’s and the page’s narrative as straightforward rewritings of the folktale by having the former travel *away* from London and on a coach and the latter as not a cat-owner, Gissing’s Richard remains sufficiently inspired to make the eighty-mile journey on foot.

The implied author further distances and ironizes Richard the narrator by showing his limited understanding of Shakespeare. The first four lines of the prologue that Mr. Bradford gives Richard suggest that Shakespeare’s strength and universality derive from his ability to mirror and to intensify his audience’s feelings:

When ancient Thespis on the primal stage
First showed the art to mimic love or rage,
How glowed the heart of each beholder then,
Taught by his voice the brotherhood of men! (8)

However, the potentially helpful images of a porous and mutually-informative relationship between the stage and the world and of art as mimicry and deception, evoked here, escape Richard, who habitually transposes and reads allusions out of the context in which they were spoken originally. Richard meets Mr. Bradford after he overhears Richard recite some lines from Byron’s *Manfred* “in a voice half choked with feeling”:

Fare thee well!
I ne’er shall see thee more. As my first glance
Of love and wonder was for thee, then take
My latest look: thou wilt not beam on one
To whom the gifts of life and warmth have been
Of a more fatal nature. (5)

Richard recognizes the inappropriateness of his utterance, but Mr. Bradford flatters him with an answering allusion: “I may claim to be something of a judge in these matters, and I may say with Polonius, Fore God, well spoken; with good accent, and good discretion” (5). As readers of *Hamlet*, we might recognize that Polonius is not the most discriminating of judges and, moreover, his possible complicity in Claudius’ usurpation or, at the very least, his unquestioning support and encouragement of that king lends a sinister overtone to our reading of Mr. Bradford.⁷ These suspicions are intensified by his subsequent allusion to *Macbeth*. Mr. Bradford quotes from the first murderer when he tells the third one, as they are waiting for Banquo and his son Fleance: “The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day” (5). The most apparent suggestion of this allusion—that of murderers waiting for their unsuspecting victims—eludes Richard, who happily com-

pletes the quotation without considering who the victimizers and who the victims are. Gissing's comic disposition is revealed since Mr. Bradford, while deceptive, is not murderous. Richard's recognition of the incongruence of his earlier allusion to Byron and to the experience of looking at the sun "sinking amid unutterable glories" (5) is telling, as he is not more perceptive as a reader of Shakespeare than he is of Byron. Richard's comic extravagance colours his narrative, and this manifests itself most clearly through a plot ambiguity that Gissing introduces. Although Richard claims that Mr. Bradford lives in the bedroom one floor below his, and corroborates this fact by revealing how, from this bedroom, he mounted a flight of stairs to return to his own, he identifies Mr. Bradford, to the landlord and his audience at the end of the story, as "the gentleman who has the room upstairs" (9). In favour of giving an entertaining account, and possibly under the influence of the disturbing memory of his costume—"a long coat of eighteenth-century pattern" (3) and "a pair of very wide white trousers" (3)—Richard jeopardizes reliability, and yet this is at one with his character, whom Barbara Rawlinson quite rightly identifies "as an incurable romantic, who thinks and speaks as did the poets of a bygone age" (144). Still, the wall that separates this bygone age from the Victorian present seems precariously thin even without Richard's contribution: Shakespeare's greatest hit is open for revision; Shakespeare, Byron, and Dickens creep into late-Victorian language; and Richard inherits a vintage eighteenth-century costume.

Rhetorical Strategy in "The Tyrant's Apology"

If the oscillation between the more mature storyteller and his younger self is apparent in "My First Rehearsal," it similarly informs our reading of "The Tyrant's Apology." In this story, completed on 13 October 1894, and first published in the monthly *English Illustrated Magazine* on July 1895, Gissing offers a more sustained reflection of a married woman's markedly limited rights, as is in keeping with his and many of his contemporaries' writing in the mid-1890s.⁸ Twenty-eight of Gissing's short stories were published in 1895 and five of these in the *English Illustrated Magazine*.⁹ For "The Tyrant's Apology," Gissing received £12.12s, a sum that he received for many of his stories published in this periodical (*Bibliography* 274). The magazine published stand-alone pictures, stories, poems, short plays, and sketches of many kinds, and it "capitalized on the popularity of photographs" (Primeau 212).¹⁰ The monological I-narrator of "The Tyrant's Apology" describes, to Jameson, his unhappy marital experiences with the

extravagant Jenny, with whom Jameson was once in love before he had left England for unexplained reasons. These experiences derive principally from his attempt to re-educate his wife. The narrator's story serves a dual purpose. First, he intends to lessen Jameson's seemingly-undiminished concern for Jenny, as we may infer from his jealous outburst and barely-veiled threat near the beginning of the story: "How can *that* give you a right [to meddle in my private affairs]? For all I know, a dozen other men were in love with her. You had your chance, I suppose, and made what you could of it. That's an old story. It happens that *I* married her, and if any man has the astounding impudence—" (297). Second, the narrator intends that his story challenge his wife's: "I'm well aware that Jenny wants people to pity her; who ever knew the woman that didn't? You don't like what I've got to say, but I can't help that; I didn't begin on the subject. I'm a man talking about his wife—that's to say, I see facts as facts, and not through a mist of sentiment" (297). Clearly, the narrator's account is not impartial: he is a discordant narrator, one "who is biased or confused, inducing one to look, behind the story he or she tells, for a different meaning from the one he himself or she herself provides" (Cohn 307).¹¹

E. Warwick Slinn describes the centrality of "process and enactment" to the dramatic monologue's rhetorical effects: "It is not a matter of writing directly about cultural problems, which might as easily be done in polemic prose, but of displaying the fundamental act of utterance that grounds subjectivity and speech in cultural contexts and processes" (91). Gissing's story makes use of this strategy and we are encouraged to decode Jenny's story, which the narrator markedly strives to conceal from Jameson and from us. Before her marriage, Jenny was a New Woman, as the narrator confides to Jameson: "Her cigarette-smoking, her night rambling, her talk about forbidden things—pah! She wished to be thought a fast girl, and it's rather wonderful, when one comes to think of it, that the limits of the possible weren't passed" (298). Such limits, as Maria Teresa Chialant has argued, are precariously undefined for "the new female inhabitants in the city" (53) that we find in Gissing's novels: these characters occupy "an ambiguously liminal position between the streetwalker—the public woman *par excellence*—and the emancipated woman, the one occupied by working girls, shop assistants, shopping ladies or other women who enjoyed loitering about the city, going to theatres or exhibition halls by themselves" (53). The reformed Jenny avoids cigarettes, doubtful talk, and company that the narrator sees as being of ill-repute. He tells Jameson: "How on earth she got together such a menagerie of friends I never understood. To this day I

have a suspicion that some of the men one met there on Sunday were shop[-]walkers; yet we know that some were *not*" (298).¹² Unsurprisingly enough, this better sort includes himself, as he makes clear: "Jenny married me because there seemed no hope of marrying anyone else of equally good social position. She was fastidious; she knew a gentleman from a gent, and only tolerated the sham when he helped to fill a room and applaud her comic songs" (298). With her marriage, Jenny exchanges this company for none except a domestic, a subscription to Mudie's, clothes, and occasionally, the narrator's society.

However, as the story's title suggests, the narrator is not the essentially kind but ignorant Arthur Golding from *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and he does not aspire, as Arthur does, to enhance Jenny's circumstances out of sympathy. The narrator's narcissistic impulses are suggested to us in the course of his lengthy monologue and indicated to its first readers in the *English Illustrated Magazine* by William Douglas Almond's four pictures to accompany the short story.¹³ Almond's first illustration shows Jameson smoking and sitting on a chair while he pensively watches the narrator as he tells his story (with the help of some dynamic hand movements) (see fig. 1). The narrator's decision to marry Jenny has much to do with his career ambitions, and this is apparent through his description of her as one about whom "[n]o one could find vulgarity in her face—or in her ways either, when she wasn't acting up to her ideas of fashionable freedom" (298)—and how she "made [him] proud when [he] walked with her along the streets" (300). It is no coincidence that Almond selected this latter passage as inspiration for the second and the largest of his illustrations (fig. 2). In it, we see Jenny arrayed in a smart outfit as she walks beside the slightly sinister looking narrator and as they win the admiration of a female vendor in the streets: the narrator's vanity is shown, thus, to be as ridiculous as his snobbery towards shop-walkers. The next illustration displays a full party in the company of which Jenny and the narrator are hardly distinguishable (fig. 3). While the picture's inscription says "Oh! the gaping fools we gathered about us! I have sat listening to their talk until my jaw dropped and my eyes grew fixed in an idiot stare" (302), Almond clearly encourages us to recognize that the narrator is angered not only, as he claims, by the quality of the conversations, but also because he is not the focus of attention despite his being the host.¹⁴

THE TYRANT'S APOLOGY



WHAT the deuce do you mean?
What right have you to meddle
in my private affairs? It's confounded

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Fig. 1. Almond's drawing of Jameson and the narrator for "The Tyrant's Apology," *The English Illustrated Magazine* (July 1895; print; 297).



OH! THE GAPING FOOLS WE GATHERED ABOUT US! I HAVE SAT LISTENING TO THEIR TALK
UNTIL MY JAW DROPPED AND MY EYES GREW FIXED IN AN IDIOT STARE.

Fig. 3. The narrator and Jenny fit in all too well in Almond's drawing (Jul. 1895; print; 303).

The selfishly-inclined narrator is committed to enhancing his prospects as he tells Jameson: "My prospects had to be considered; I was feeling a bit anxious about things, and saw the necessity of keeping in with a certain class of people" (298). This desire for assimilation to a class ostensibly beyond the reach of his modest earnings informs his every choice, including his marriage to Jenny, and even the house that he rents: he confesses to Jameson that he "hadn't the courage to take as cheap a house as [he] ought

to have done" (299) because he "secretly hoped that a year or two would make a good deal of difference in [his] position" (299). These ambitions are at odds with the image of servitude that he evokes when he describes how "Jenny had beaten [him]; [and that] she led [him] along like a pet dog with a collar round its neck" (301). In times of prosperity, the narrator indulges and does not seem particularly discontented with Jenny's increasingly expensive housekeeping: "We lived like everyone else: had a swarm of acquaintances; gave dinners now and then; went to places of amusement because we were ashamed not to be seen there; dressed extravagantly; did everything that public opinion demands" (301). One would most certainly not have gathered from this jocular description, punctuated by no fewer than one colon and three semi-colons, that it captures two years of an unhappy marriage.

The narrator appreciates society as much as Jenny, and it is only the recognition of the "tolerably contemptible figure [he] must have cut" (302) as her husband, and the pressures of an attack of influenza, of her increasing expenditures in keeping up appearances, and of their worsening finances, that he recognizes that "[t]he social circle to which [he] belong[s] won't allow [him] to spend a farthing on [him]self" (303), and he quickly shifts his anger towards society to the much easier target of Jenny. While the narrator encourages us to connect the influenza to the fact that he was unable to "insure [his] life, though it's [his] duty to do so, because the premium goes in keeping up appearances" (303), we infer that his illness also circumscribes his level of participation in their hosted social events. "What sort of people are they who impose this slavery on me?" he asks her: "Wretched curs living a life like my own, slaves each of the other, secretly miserable because they spend beyond their means, and aping a social rank altogether above them. Out of regard for their opinion, I condemn myself to a squalid hell, of toil and sham pleasure. Does this strike you as reasonable?" (303-04)¹⁵ The narrator could have asked himself these very questions: he conspicuously erases his personal, even if slightly less active, responsibility in driving up expenses and their mutual desire for society. That Jenny's father had suffered a "smash" (298), and that he "had cut and run before his family did" (298), that Jenny asks the narrator what her allowance was to be if she leaves him, and that she subsequently attempts, in the narrator's words, "to renew the quarrel" (304) only go to show how limited her means and prospects of subsistence are, how insufficient this conspicuously undisclosed sum is, and how she has no choice but to stay in a marriage with this tyrant.

Conclusion

Barbara Rawlinson demonstrates that Gissing's short stories are invaluable both "as a source of autobiographical detail" (53) and "as a proving ground for some of the material that recurs in revised form in his later work" (53). Pierre Coustillas' reading of "My First Rehearsal" in relation to Gissing's exposure, at an early age, to theatricals produced by his family's friend Matthew Bussey Hick who had founded 'the Tragedians of Wakefield,' to the speech-nights of his schooldays at Lindow Grove School, and to his Chicago experiences among actors in a Wabash Avenue boarding-house ("Theatre" 6) would lend support to Rawlinson's argument. So too is it supported by Gissing's approach to teaching: Gissing, according to his pupil George A. Stearns, "would roll out the lines [of Greek and Latin] with the zest of an actor on the stage, striving by intonation to bring out the meaning" ("Tuition" 28). However, Gissing's stories are equally valuable, I believe, for their individual merits and their own psychological complexities, as well as for the light they shed on Gissing as a reader. Gissing's subsumption of the dramatic monologue within the form of the short story speaks to his aspirations for a new aesthetics, one that he describes in a letter to Algernon on 19 July 1885. Gissing distinguishes his and his contemporaries' writings from those of their predecessors:

Thackeray & Dickens wrote at enormous length, & with profusion of detail; their plan is to tell everything, to leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think is this later method, of merely suggesting; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life,—hinting, surmising, telling in detail what *can* so be told, & no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment. (2: 320)¹⁶

Gissing may be influenced by Henry James' "The Art of Fiction" (1884). Gissing's reading of James dated back as early as 14 March 1882 when, in a letter to his sister Ellen, he described reading a life of Nathaniel Hawthorne with great interest (2: 76)—probably James' (1879) for the *English Men of Letters* series (2: 77; n. 2). To Eduard Bertz, Gissing writes, on 17 March 1892:

Yes, I am inclined to think that the purely impersonal method of narrative has its advantages. Of course it approximates to the dramatic. No English writer that I know (unless it be George Moore) has yet succeeded in adopting this method. Still, I shall never try (& you do not wish me) to suppress my own *spirit*. To do that, it seems to me, would be to renounce the specific character of the novelist. Better, in that case, to write plays. (5: 22)

Philip Horne, in his discussion of Henry James' short stories in relation to the marketplace, emphasizes the two meanings of the term "economy":

“One is artistic and metaphorical, elevating the literary object above the market; the other commercial, calculating the cost of time spent and the value of money to be earned” (“Short Story” 6). The same could be said of Gissing’s short stories: he too relies on them to supplement his income, and yet his knowledge of late-Victorian publishing does not diminish the psychological depth and artistry of his work. This conflict between the concerns of the market and the metaphorical is written into the very texture and meaning of Gissing’s “The Fate of Humphrey Snell,” published in the October 1895 *English Illustrated Magazine*, and shortly after “The Tyrant’s Apology.” While Humphrey’s elder brothers delight in “profit and loss, the theatre, and music-halls, the pleasures of the street” (4), Humphrey “would [in their view] walk himself to death for the sake of gathering a few flowers, which he pressed in sheets of paper and stored away as if they were worth money” (4). And yet, if Gissing’s narrator is critical of these elder Snells, he does not, as I showed in endnote 15 below, necessarily side with Humphrey.

Throughout “The Tyrant’s Apology,” we get suggestions of the interlocutor Jameson’s responses, in Browningsque-implied stage directions when the narrator makes two requests that he waits (297, 298) and when, after the narrator tells Jameson that he “at all events, still ha[s] a future” (298) since he is not married to Jenny, the narrator responds to Jameson’s reaction: “I, too? Heaven only knows” (298).¹⁷ Jameson’s response is registered most clearly when the narrator presses: “I’m glad to see you smile. Just as well to keep that side in view. There’s more comedy than tragedy in the whole affair, if only you see the truth of it. Thanks to me, you know. If I had been a different sort of man—” (299).¹⁸ The dramatic potential of Gissing’s stories and the inwardness of his characters are central to his aesthetics, and he effectively makes psychology as it developed in the nineteenth century into a tool for a new creative method. Henry James argues for Browning’s achievement in “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*,” “[I]t takes a great mind, one of the greatest, we may at once say, to make these persons [in Browning’s verse-novel] express and confess themselves to such an effect of intellectual splendour. He resorts primarily to *their* sense, their sense of themselves and of everything else they know, to exhibit them, and has for this purpose to keep them, and to keep them persistently and inexhaustibly, under the fixed lens of his prodigious vision” (799). Gissing understood Browning and the complexity of his novel-poetry project. It is precisely the gaps, the incongruities, the omissions, the emphases, and the evocations of these narrators—imbued with

their very individual psychologies, worldviews, and narrative goals—that make them exist as characters and their stories come alive, and for Gissing, it seems, we will be less inclined to believe in these stories if the voices of their narrators, like Esther, resemble those of their creators too closely.

Robert Langbaum sees the dramatic monologue's genius in the effect "created by the tension between sympathy and moral judgment" (85): "[W]e understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding. The combination of sympathy and judgment makes the dramatic monologue suitable for expressing all kinds of extraordinary points of view, whether moral, emotional or historical . . ." (96).¹⁹ John Maynard makes the case that "the reader is driven to create a position for himself as listener":

[T]he listener in the poem, the second point of a triangle, offers not a fixed reference point but an unsettling vantage point, which can attract the overhearer, repel him, or set him off in a complicated arc as he seeks a listener position where he can be comfortable. The activity thus created in the reader provides much of the excitement in the experience of a dramatic poem and directs the process of interpretation as a dialectic one, in which viewpoints leads to interpretation, which in turn may lead to a repositioning of the viewpoint. (108)

The interplay between sympathy and judgment is central, similarly, to our experience of Gissing's short stories: we are attracted to these narrators, though we are encouraged to question Richard's narcissistic impulse, to doubt the unnamed narrator's reliability, to sympathize with Jenny even if we do not condone her extravagance and, finally, to place our loyalties where we—and not the narrators and/or, at times, their authors—see fit.²⁰ Gissing's borrowings from the dramatic monologue in these two stories are indicative of his wider interests in subjectivity, in perspective, and in psychology. These threads make him important both as a successor to Shakespeare's example (strong in Browning's work) and as a predecessor to the emergent first-person works of Conrad and Ford—and they manifest themselves more fully in his novels.

¹ The narrator of "The Tyrant's Apology" begins his monologue by asking Jameson: "What the deuce do you mean? What right have you to meddle in my private affairs?" (297). I thank Philip Horne, Tyler Shores, and Peter Swaab for their incisive reading; Pierre and Hélène Coustillas for their help; and audience members at Fourth International George Gissing Conference 2011: "Gissing's World within the World: Art and the Artist," and the University College London English Department Research Seminar, especially Charlotte Mitchell and Michael Sayeau, for their suggestions. I am grateful to the Social Science and

Humanities Research Council of Canada, Canadian Centennial Scholar-ship Fund, and University College London for their generous support.

² The title “The Tyrant’s Apology” is heavily reminiscent of those of dramatic monologues, for example, Robert Browning’s “Bishop Blougram’s Apology.” For Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, “This device [of the unreliable eye-witness] lends an especially ironical cast to an entire narrative, laying on readers a special burden of enjoyable ratiocination, as they seek to understand what the character telling the story cannot himself comprehend” (263). The ironies of both stories necessitate, as Wayne Booth puts it, “a required rejection of the surface meaning; a consideration of alternatives; a decision about the author’s position; and a reconstruction in harmony with what we infer about that position” (*Irony* 147).

³ Ina Beth Sessions identifies, in “The Dramatic Monologue,” a perfect example as one with “the definite characteristics of speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present” (508). A. Dwight Culler’s “Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue” sees the poem arising out of prosopopoeia and monodrama (368).

⁴ Langbaum elaborates on this change: “[C]haracter has always given way to general meaning; whereas the nineteenth century preferred to weight the view and the inclination to be interested in it to have their way against the general meaning. That is what the nineteenth century did with its reading of Shakespeare, where it may not have had the right to, and what it did where it undoubtedly had the right—with its own literature, as in the dramatic monologue” (180).

⁵ Compare Gissing’s first published novel *Workers in the Dawn* (1880). In it, the artist Gresham meets Arthur after seeing his artwork displayed in a printer’s shop’s window:

Glancing up by chance into the printer’s window, he saw a neatly-framed water-colour picture hanging there for sale, marked at the modest figure of five shillings. The execution of the drawing was in some respects remarkable, but this would hardly have sufficed to detain him without some other source of interest. This, however, he found in the picture itself, its subject and outline; for it was a copy of a picture of his own which had recently been exhibited in London, and had attracted some attention. (1: 225)

This picture is of a scene from *Cymbeline*. Arthur’s painting, more specifically, his copy of an engraving of the Shakespeare-inspired painting printed in a newspaper mark the transfer from an art gallery to a printer’s window, and from the reception of a presumably more socially privileged context to one that is underprivileged. It is no coincidence that the painting is displayed in a printer’s shop, an important site that bridges the production and distribution of literature and of culture. Gissing invites us to contrast the socially- and financially-underprivileged Arthur, who paints from natural observation, with the privileged and schooled Gresham, who would not have noticed Arthur’s work had it not been a copy of his own.

⁶ These ironies would not have escaped Gissing, who questioned, in a letter on 15 June 1880 to his brother Algernon, the *Athenaeum* reviewer’s characterization of Gresham: “[W]hat in the name of conscience does the fellow mean by calling Gresham a ‘Skimpolian Cynic’? I imagine the likeness between him & Harold Skimpole, in ‘Bleak House,’ is something which it requires special critical acumen to discover” (1: 282). Gissing sees Richard as *Bleak House*’s central character: “In Richard Carstone, about whom the story may be said to circle, David tried to carry out a purpose he had once entertained with regard to Walter Gay in *Dombey and Son*, that of showing a good lad at the mercy of temptations

and circumstances which little by little wreck his life; but Richard has very little life to lose, and we form a shadowy conception of his amiably futile personality” (“*Bleak House*” 174-75). Gissing referred to the novel in letters to Algernon throughout May and June 1878 when Gissing sent him instalments published in the *Household Edition of Dickens* series by Chapman and Hall (1: 95; n. 1). Gissing read selections from *Bleak House* on July 15 (*London and the Life of Literature* 36), and it remained in his thoughts throughout February and March 1879 when he wrote to tell his brother that the only store that carried the novel’s first parts had closed and he is unsure when it will reopen. Gissing returns to Dick Whittington in the opening of *New Grub Street* (1891), as John Sloan has made explicit: “It is telling that Milvain’s account of his first journey to London should follow his justification of careerism. Milvain’s success is presented as a form of Dick Whittington-like progress in the London literary marketplace” (“Gissing and Hogarth” 255-56). See Patrick Parrinder’s “‘Turn Again, Dick Whittington!’: Dickens, Wordsworth, and the Boundaries of the City” for an interesting account of the authors’ use of the folktale.

⁷ See also Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone” (1921), in which Sherlock Holmes—in a move evocative of Polonius—uses his bedroom’s second door, which leads behind a curtain, to hide behind it and to listen in on Count Sylvius and Mr. Merton.

⁸ See, for instance, Gissing’s *Eve’s Ransom* (1895) and *Sleeping Fires* (1895). Lieutenant-Colonel George F. White’s short story “Twice Told,” the next story but one after “The Tyrant’s Apology,” shares its concerns. In it, the sisters Muriel and Hester live with their three brothers and their widower father, a reverend who struggles to make ends meet: “To Hester, possessing but a dim reflex of her sister’s loveliness, life jogged on comfortably enough at home, despite village troubles and impostors—for somehow all the parish work had fallen upon her shoulders. With beauty-dowered Muriel, out-of-the-way Showcombe and its dingy, ill-furnished Rectory was, in her own words, ‘simply hateful’” (309).

⁹ Throughout his career, Gissing published twenty stories in the *English Illustrated Magazine*. See figures 4 and 5 in my Appendix, which show when and where Gissing’s short stories were published.

¹⁰ John Sloan identifies the influence of photography on the illustrations of Gissing’s short stories from the 1890s when he describes them as being “essentially naturalistic and photographic in style” (“Gissing and Hogarth” 250).

¹¹ Ralph W. Rader suggests, in his writing on the dramatic monologue, that this is part of its style: “Although in all dramatic monologues we are ignorant of the final outcome of the actor’s act as it develops in relation to its dramatized object, our understanding of the actor himself and his motives is always superior or inferior, as it is with real people. We either do not understand the actor’s purposes as well as he does himself, his knowledge or power exceeding ours . . . , or we understand him better than he understands himself . . .” (139).

¹² A shop-walker is “an assistant exercising general supervision over a department of a shop; [or] an attendant who directs customers to that part of the premises where the goods they wish to inspect or purchase are to be found” (“Shop-walker,” def.).

¹³ Gissing referred to the completed manuscript as being five and a half pages long in his diary (351). The published work, at eight pages, is about average for the *English Illustrated Magazine*.

¹⁴ Pierre Coustillas observes in a personal message: “Gissing rarely commented on the illustrations of his short stories and apparently never on those of Almond, but he liked Fred Barnard’s to ‘The Fate of Humphrey Snell,’ as his correspondence shows. He duly noticed the reproduction by C. K. Shorter of the picture of Humphrey.” Shorter was the editor of the

English Illustrated Magazine. Gissing referred to Barnard in a number of letters. Gissing wrote to Algernon on 4 August 1894: "Barnard is a good man; he has illustrated some of Dickens fairly well" (5: 224). Gissing did not appreciate his renderings consistently. On 4 August 1894, Gissing recorded, in his diary: "Shorter sends a letter addressed to him by Fred Barnard, who is illustrating 'Eve's Ransom', and who wishes to know whether I like the sketches of heads which he encloses. Dengate and Hilliard won't do; wrote to Barnard with suggestions" (343). Barnard was eventually replaced because his alcoholic problems prevented him from meeting deadlines. Coustillas' reference to Gissing's correspondence above is to two letters about Barnard's picture for "Humphrey Snell." On 28 September 1895, Gissing wrote to Barnard: "I must really let you know how very much I am pleased with the full-page drawing you have done for my story in the new *English Illustrated*. I think it very beautiful, & excellent as a presentment of my thought. It shall be framed for my study-wall,—for indeed the picture is symbolical, & has more significance than the ordinary eye will discover in it" (6: 33). Gissing describes, in a letter to his sister Ellen on 15 November, "Did you see Fred Barnard's beautiful illustration to 'The Fate of Humphrey Snell?'—a favourite story of mine—symbolical of much, as Carlyle says" (6: 58). Gissing's enthusiasm for the picture manifests itself also in his diary, in which he writes on 2 October, that Barnard promises to give him the original drawing (390). Whether or not Barnard kept his promise, Gissing liked it well enough to save a copy of the published piece and this is now in the Coustillas' collection (6: 33; n. 2).

¹⁵ Gissing's 1895 stories in the *English Illustrated Magazine* are often critical of individuals living and working alone. The titular character of "The Poet's Portmanteau" (February) returns to London from a "Devon hermitage" (5). He pays a week's rent for and leaves his belongings at a rented lodging without even getting a receipt. Moreover, as he reflects back on his tour de force, a poem written while he was living in Devon, eight years later, "on the whole he was glad it had never been published. To be sure, no publisher would have risked money on it. In his vague recollection, the thing seemed horribly crude; he remembered a line or two that made him shut his eyes and mutter inarticulately" (7). While this writer character learns that he had romanticized about the quality of previous work, the reclusive philologist of "In Honour Bound" (July) mistakenly thinks that his landlady, a widow, is in love with him when her kindness prevents her from confessing that he is in the way of her remarriage. The titular character of "The Fate of Humphrey Snell" (October) falls in love with and decides to marry Annie Frost just because she—in an allusion to *Julius Caesar*—"willingly lent ear" (9), and his previously-solitary existence led him to overread her attention: "He imagined she understood him, that her mute attention meant sympathy" (9). Gissing ends the story by punning on Annie's kisses at the end of the letter in which she agrees to marry him: "There followed a row of crosses, which Humphrey found it easy to interpret. A cross is frequently set upon a grave; but he did not think of that" (10). Finally, it is only by dining and by conversing with a stranger, that Laurence Nangle, in "An Inspiration" (December) gains the courage to declare his affection for the woman he loves and who loves him in return, and thus averts miserable lives for them and, quite possibly, his own death in a workhouse.

¹⁶ James' essay forms part of a larger conversation about fiction, as Adeline R. Tintner writes:

The entire literary controversy on the nature of fiction was started by Walter Besant on the occasion of his lecture, 'The Art of Fiction,' delivered at the Royal Institution, April 25, 1884 . . . which was followed by a short essay in the *Pall Mall Gazette* by Andrew Lang, also called 'The Art of Fiction.' This was followed by

‘The Art of Fiction’ by Henry James in *Longman’s Magazine* for September 1884. This in turn called forth Stevenson’s ‘Humble Remonstrance’ in the same magazine for December, 1884. (4)

Gissing wrote to Algernon on 2 May 1884: “Walter Besant has been instructing the Royal Institution how to write novels—*la belle idée!* All precept in such matters is useless” (2: 212). Tintner calls attention to the writer characters Harold Biffen’s and Edwin Reardon’s discussion about the art of fiction in *New Grub Street* (4). In response to Reardon’s suggestion that “[t]here may surely exist such a thing as the art of fiction,” Biffen asserts: “It is worked out. We must have a rest from it. You, now—the best things you have done are altogether in conflict with novelistic conventionalities. It was because that black-guard review of ‘On Neutral Ground’ clumsily hinted this that I first thought of you with interest. No, no; let us copy life” (176).

¹⁷ Critics have used the term “interlocutor” to describe the audience member in a dramatic monologue, a term that “acknowledges this active presence, pointing to the inherently intersubjective feature of what is otherwise too easily read as a merely intrasubjective drama” (Slinn 81).

¹⁸ Henry James would read Jameson’s smile as a narrative act: “All writing is narration; to describe is simply to narrate things in their order of place, instead of events in their order of time” (“Miss Prescott’s ‘Azarian’” 27). As would Booth, “In a sense, every speech, every gesture, narrates” (*Fiction* 152).

¹⁹ Ralph W. Rader goes further when he argues for the need to recognize “the poet’s creative and controlling role in the dramatic monologue” (136), that is, how he or she “simulates the activity of a person imagined as virtually real whom we understand as we would an ‘other’ natural person, inferring from outward act and expression to inward purpose” (150).

²⁰ Langbaum acknowledges the advantages that the dramatic monologue offers “the poet who is not committed to a religious position, or who is addressing readers not committed and not wanting to be”: “The use of the speaker enables him to dramatize a position the possibilities of which he may want to explore as Browning explores the ‘impossible’ case. The speaker also enables him to dramatize an emotional apprehension in advance of or in conflict with his intellectual convictions . . .” (104).

Appendix

I have taken as Gissing’s short stories all of those listed by Pierre Coustillas in *George Gissing: The Definitive Bibliography*. Coustillas, as does Barbara Rawlinson in *A Man of Many Parts Gissing’s Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, includes, as Gissing’s stories “The Death-Clock,” “The Serpent-Charm,” and “Dead and Alive,” the authorship of which Coustillas and Robert Selig have debated in two issues of *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* in 1987. Figure 5 includes reprints of Gissing’s stories. I thank Pierre and Hélène Coustillas for their help with both graphs.

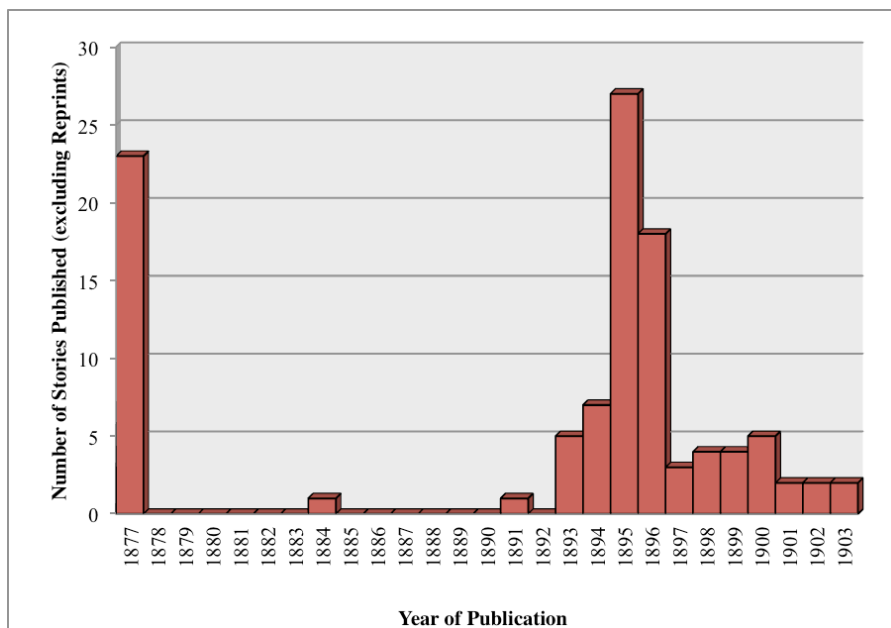


Fig. 4. Gissing's published stories year by year during his lifetime.

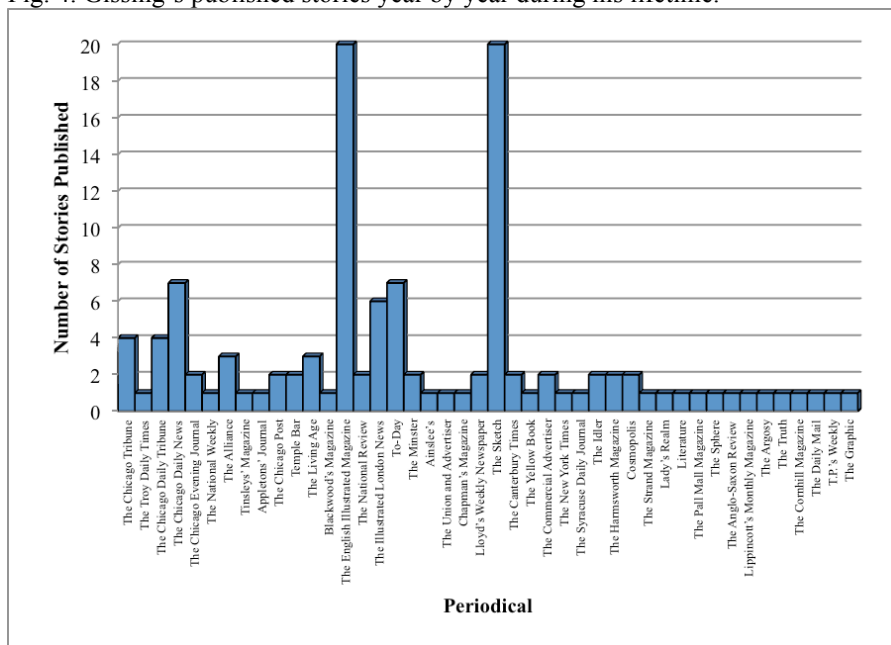


Fig. 5. Periodicals where Gissing's stories were published.

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